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ABSTRACT

In this document black English is discussed in terms of its artistic and creative elements. A schematic design for the analysis of the artistic dimensions of language is presented. The "black" way of saying things, or sense of language, is described as putting a premium not only on how words function but also on how they sound. Various examples of speech events/forms in black English are mentioned including: playing the dozens, signifying, capping, and monitoring. Dramatic, indirection, orational, orchestrational, and imagistic figures in black speech are briefly described, and excerpts from works of black writers are presented as examples of these figures. In addition, excerpts from black students at the community college level are attached to this document, and creative and artistic elements in these writings are pointed out. A disclosure model for the study of language is described. It is asserted that such a model would permit teachers to see students as users of verbal art forms, and to recognize their use of stylistic options, even when different from those usually taught as acceptable. The implications of this model with regard to student evaluation and placement, the nature and context of teacher intervention, and curriculum assessment and development are described. Existing curricula which use a contrastive approach to black English grammar are mentioned. (GC)

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ARTISTIC ELEMENTS IN BLACK ENGLISH: IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN EDUCATION

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(Paper delivered at First National Conference on Urban Education, November 24, 1975, Kansas City, Missouri)

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ARTISTIC ELEMENTS IN BLACK ENGLISH: IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN EDUCATION[1]

I'd like to begin by presenting you with a problem. The first two pages of the handouts before you are samples of student papers written by freshmen at Manhattan Community College. The papers present an interesting challenge to English teachers and are indicative of a greater challenge faced by all urban educators. I will offer one way of conceptualizing and meeting this challenge and touch on some of its implications.

My assumption in beginning in this way is that we share a commom commitment and background: a commitment to recognizing the population diversity of our students and ourselves, to <u>not</u> dropping ethnic, racial, and religious heritages into a pot, melting down and homogenizing them, but rather to seeing them as the strengths that students and teachers bring to educational and other environments; and a background of having worked and thought our way through the "deficit - difference" language controversy that plagued the early intervention programs of the 60s and acknowledging the work of William Labov and, among others, William Stewart, Roger Abrahams, Claudia Mitchell-Kiernan, and J.L. Dillard whose sociolinguistic research ended the controversy.[2]

My way of conceptualizing the challenge these student papers present involves accepting what I have come to call the "artistic dimension" of language, an approach which is based on utilizing an immediate and undervalued resource as a starting point, the literature of aestheticians and artists originally meant to explain language used in consciously wrought works

of art, and applying this resource to language used within the fabric of everyday language, that is, language used in what is conventionally considered nonartistic settings. My focus is on speech events[3] in Black English for several reasons: (1) it is the most prominent and researched social dialect in the United States; (2) because of the number of black students in schools and the influence of the dialect on speech usage in other dialects, it has importance for urban education, and (3) it seems to exhibit a high degree of "artistic" usages that may have implications for the study of other dialects as well.

The third page of your handouts is my schematic design for a framework for the analysis of the artistic dimension of language. Utilizing it and assaying its implications for the urban classroom become important when one realizes that other theoretical constructs about language usage simply are not adequate to explain some of the phenomena presented in the student papers and in the verbal behavior of some of our students. Although it is possible to come at this verbal behavior from a variety of perspectives, I have found that these categories, subcategories, and definitions have heuristic value for enhancing our understanding of language usage in our classrooms. From this perspective, the term "art" does not merely characterize certain verbal usages, but becomes the focal point for understanding an integral element in language behavior.

The framework, juxtaposed with the samples of speech events in Black English that form the next pages of your handouts function as part of a disclosure model -- pointing toward insight rather than empirical verification -- of the artistic dimension of Black English.[4]

Let us take a few minutes to explain the framework. The "ground" is the underlying and everpresent attitude toward the use of language by which words and language usage take on an extraordinary importance. Labov has stated that there are "areas of verbal skills which are highly evaluated and developed within [black] society." Roger Abrahams, Mitchell-Kiernan, and Thomas Kochman have researched speech events that are valued as verbal art forms in the black community.[5] A partial listing of them is:

sounding (or playing the dozens, or johning);
signifying;
rapping;
marking;
monitoring (or code-switching);
fancy-talk (or broad talk and sweet talk);
capping;
shucking and jiving;
copping a plea;
woofing;
louding (or loud talking);
riffing;
running it down;
tomming and jeffing.

The very existence of so many names -- names conferred by members of the black community and not constructed by linguists -- to denote specific speech events in Black English underscores the notion that Black English dwells on this artistic ground. Julius Lester expresses this point when he discusses the folk etymology of the word "butterflies:"

> These flutterbys [which was what white people originally called them] got over to our part of the world, and, well, you know how it is with us. We always got to have our way of saying something. The brother in black is going to say the thing his way or die trying. So when we looked up and saw these things come floating by, we heard some white folks call 'em "flutter-bys," and we fell out laughing. Flutterbys! Now who could say that. So we turned that thing around and called them butterflies. That sounded a whole lot better. It was easy on the tongue and easy on the ear, and that's the way words are supposed to be.[6]

What Lester is saying is that there is a "black" way of saying things -- a black sense of language -- that puts a premium not only on how words function but also on how they sound, to the extent that the two become interdependent; and that to say things in this way, one must be creative -- artistic -- with the language, willing to overturn accepted ways of saying things.

The second category follows the first: if one "dwells," as it were, one this ground, then one lives by certain "'ground' rules." Rule #1 is that each speech event has a specific form. Rule #2 is that the goal of each speech event is to provide insight through pleasure and most often through laughter. For example: playing the dozens or sounding, a form of ritualistic insult, generally begins with some formulaic expressions and also a definite syntactic pattern, which develops as the game is played and shows increased sophistication dependent on the age of the players. The "winner" is the person who literally has the last word, the capping line that his coplayer cannot answer. The audience, as well as the alternating participants, is meant to take pleasure in the activity, to laugh; insight is provided by the topics used in playing the dozens.

The "Figures" are easier to see than to explain. For the sake of time, I have provided a few examples by way of the handouts, and will explain them quickly -- and not fully.

The Dramatic Figure is the direct manipulation of the hearer's sympathies, usually found in a rap. In the excerpt from Slow Dance on the Killing Ground we hear Randall, the protagonist explaining his biography in tragic terms.

The Indirection Figure, veiling one's true emotions through duality, irony, and elegancy, is captured by Richard Wright in the excerpt from Lawd Today. Jake is using the speech event signifying, which by definition is part of this figure as it is a form of indirect insult.

Both excerpts also show the Orational Figure. Randall's language is more obviously highflown and rhetorical. Jake's use of language is comparatively simple, but the signal for the figure is given by what Mitchell-Kiernan calls a "high context" word; here the word "nigger" functions as a signal that a verbal art form is in progress.

The Orchestrational Figure, the use of sound, timing, rhythm, and meter is also present in these two excerpts. Rhyming, a productive feature of this figure, is captured in an excerpt from Cleaver's Soul on Ice.

The Imagistic Figure calls for verbal imagery of various sorts. One is the type used by Jake in Lawd Today where he exploits the meaning of every word exchanged. Randall uses the technique of monitoring or code-switching, moving back and forth between Black English and standard English grammar

in the last few lines reprinted here. Another type of verbal imagery is the apt (contextually appropriate) descriptive analogies and metaphors in a children's bout of the dozens. This is not an exhaustive treatment of this figure.

Figure-ing deals with the reciprocal relationship between speakers and hearers. This relationship creates an atmosphere in which improvisation and contextual appropriateness are more important than the finished product.[7]

A disclosure model is good only if it discloses. The model for the artistic dimension of Black English discloses several points about the papers with which we began and opens up possibilities for ways in which we work with our students in urban classrooms.

First: the disclosure model enables us to recognize more clearly exactly what the student is doing with language. If we look back at paper #1, we see a student using the Orchestrational Figure. In paper #2, the student uses the Indirection Figure; in opposition to the standard expository approach most often used in teaching freshman composition, the student sets up certain points and concludes with the thesis statement.

Second: As the disclosure model helps us to understand what the student is producing, it enables us to accept the student in a new way -- to recognize the student as a user of verbal art forms; to recognize his mastery of or attempts at a concrete set of stylistic options that are being exercised, even when they differ from those we find acceptable or those we want to teach.

This has consequences for the ways in which we evaluate and place students. We do not yet know what the frequency of co-occurrence of Black English grammatical features and artistic features is. One thing I know: when a student uses a high number of the grammatical features with the artistic ones, he is classified as needing remedial work -- the Orational and Orchestrational Figures, for example, can issue in malapropisms and ungrammatical expressions. When a student uses standard English grammatical features and Black English artistic features, he is called extremely creative. (I have finished the handouts with examples of student writing that fit into both categories.) Before we can plan intervention with either student, we must accept him as what Abrahams calls a "man of words."

Third: The disclosure model gives us tools for changing the nature and content of our intervention. Given a context for their own intuitions about language, students begin to work from their own strengths. They become learners and also teachers. Teachers also become learners, as everyone engages in ethnographic and linguistic research, ferreting out new usages and labelling old ones. Using the model of the artistic dimension of Black English, all students learn not only about Black English but about language usage in their own communities. Students with students and students with teachers are forced to be more honest with themselves and with one another. There is an aspect of "separation" as students and teachers look into their own values about language and their feelings about language. Language is the house of man's thought, and feelings

about it go very deep. We are all brought back together by the common focus on language. From a teacher's perspective, I find these classes to be the most emotionally exhausting I have ever taught -- and also the most intellectually exciting.

The models (such as those used in the handouts) help students become conscious of their language usage. The models can be used, constrastively, with other prose models. Students can graphically see the differences between them, and ways of incorporating elements of one into another can be discussed. Reasons for modulating in favor of one style or another can be intelligently explored. The framework and models can also be used to teach concepts: "Ground" and "'Ground' Rules" can be used to explore the role of language in society, sparking research into etymology, the value placed on certain types of language usage in certain communities, and the "homogenization" of communication techniques in American culture. The Figures can be used to teach literary devices -- analogy, metaphor, simile, among others. In a multi-ethnic classroom, students can deal with what my classes have come to call "audience appropriate" images by experimenting with images that come directly out of ethnic experience and deciding which ones have more or less universal applicability.

There is a fourth, more theoretical, implication of the artistic dimension: curriculum assessment and development. With respect to curriculum specifically structured for speakers of Black English grammar, there are four curricula that use a contrastive approach: The "Ollie" Readers (for elementary school), by members of the Center for Applied Linguistics; English Now

(for junior and senior high school), by Irwin Feigenbaum; Keys to American English (for upper-level students), by Gefert, Raspa, and Richards; and A Manual for Teaching Standard English Writing to Speakers Showing Black English Influences in Their Writing (for college students), by the members of the Language Curriculum Research Group of Brooklyn College. Only the last curriculum shows any real use of the artistic dimension, although the others call for it or use it without acknowledging it. All the curricula should be analyzed from the artistic standpoint and could reinforce their contrastive approach to grammar with a contrastive approach to language usage.

Curriculum intended for multi-ethnic classrooms should also be assessed for the relative place for or lack of place for the artistic dimension of language usage. (A good starting point might be the assessment of current interaction analysis studies.) What we find will be significant. While we do not know what role the artistic dimension plays in the language usage of other ethnic groups (although I suspect it plays a large one), the immediate importance of finding out if present curriculum accepts and reinforces the artistic dimension will be to know if the language usage of one particular group is recognized. If it is not, we are not only undervaluing these students, but undervaluing what can be learned by all students as well.

NOTES

[1]This paper is based on my dissertation, in progress at Teachers College, Columbia University, "The Artistic Dimension of Black English: A Disclosure Model and Its Implications for Curriculum and Instruction." I would like to acknowledge the help of Dr. Milton Baxter, Dr. Raymond McDermott, and Arley Bondarin in preparing this paper.

[2]William Labov, "Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence," The Atlantic 229,6 (June 1972) 59-68; "A Note on the Relation of Reading Failure to Peer Group Status in Urban Ghettoes," The Florida FL Reporter 7,1 (Spring/Summer 1969) 54-57; A Study of the Nonstandard English of Negro and Puerto-Rican Speakers in New York City, 2 vols., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). William Stewart, "Understanding Black Language," in Black America, ed. by John F. Szwed (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970), pp.121-32. Roger Abrahams, "Black Talking on the Streets," in Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking, ed. by Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 240-62; Deep Down in the Jungle (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970); "Patterns of Performance in the British West Indies," in Afro-American Anthropology, ed. by Norman E. Whitten, Jr. and John F. Szwed (New York: The Free Press, 1970), pp. 163-79; "Rapping and Capping: Black Talk as Art," in Black America, pp. 132-43. Claudia Mitchell-Kiernan, Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community (California: University of California at Berkeley, 1969). J.L. Dillard, Black English (New York: Random House, 1972).

[3]The term "speech event" is used here because it is already a productive ter[illegible] ethnographic literature. However, I wish to stipulate that I am talking about a more generalized "language event," in the sense that qualities of speech events show up in all aspects of verbal behavior and are not limited to only oral speech events. In addition, the terms "Black English" and "standard English" are retained not for their theoretical relevance but simply for their familiarity.

[4]For a discussion of disclosure models as a technique of analysis, see Ian Ramsey, Models and Mystery (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Ramsey's disclosure model is very similar to what Max Black calls an "analogue" model in Models and Metaphor (New York: Cornell University Press, 1962).

[5]See note 2 above; also see, Thomas Kochman, "Toward an Ethnography of Black American Speech Behavior," in Afro-American Anthropology, pp. 145-62.

[6]Black Folktales (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 8.

[7]This aspect of the framework is more closely related to what has come to be called the "Black Aesthetic" than the writings of other aestheticians and artists. See, Addison Gayle, ed., The Black Aesthetic (New York: Anchor Books, 1972).

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Paznik. Handouts...1

1. Student paper, reproduced without correction

Title: Autobiography

The discussion's which will be in the future a factor of my life have described me as a person who would want to live forever only for one purpose, to help people who can't get themselves out of trouble. I would like to give them the assistance they would need, and they would like help from a person of high authority in order for either party may achieve the goal he set out to do. I would like to become a lawyer only to help the right and let the wrong be punished in the way our Lord has his or her future planned.

I have realized that in order for that person to achieve his goal, that person must have the will power to be able to go forth and conquer trouble if necessary. If a person wishes to achieve all these goals he must be a person of maturity, a person who can think freely with the power of his own mind, a person who wishes to accomplish his ability to go forth. I believe I have all these qualities and many more in order for me to achieve the goal I am working for.

2. Student paper, reproduced without correction

Title: Nixon, Watergate, and Impeachment: What Does This Mean?

Let's start from the beginning, we find all the evidence: (a) The finding of doors being ajar leading up to this case. Where they should be locked. (b) The arresting of four Republican spies. The confessing of all four involved in breaking into the democratic office. We should also look further into every corner of this investigation. It has been proven without a doubt that Nixon was responsible for the whole underhanded dirty work. We, the people, have listened and read all the evidence pertaining to the case.

We have listened and looked at the Senate Investigating Committee. Everyday for almost one solid year we have been bombarded by more and more incriminating material being brought to the public attention. This material or evidence dealt with those who were mainly at fault. Now the President tells us that he had no knowledge of any wrong doing within his staff. But how can you expect us to believe this man when he, himself, has tapped his own phone? The phone that has been used in important conversations with heads of states. Can you be sure that a man so devious and underhanded as to tap his own phone, would not have the knowledge of whats going on in his own backyard?

Impeachment would be too good for this man, who once had in his office a Vice President who was convicted of tax evasion and kickbacks. People of these United States it is time to awaken to the facts. The President has shown us what type of man he is, by eliminating the people who could enlighten us to all the facts, the Special Prosecutor and all those convicted with this investigation.

Don't allow this man to fool you by this gestures of giving up the tapes. This should not be the only thing he should be giving up. It is the office we want; tapes can be altered to prove nothing. People, we are the ones who put this man in office and it is time that we have a voice. Tell those people we put in office that we're tired of all this prolonged carepet bagging. We want a new day.

Schematic Design of the Disclosure Model for the Artistic Dimension of Language

Category	Subcategory	Definition
The "Ground"		the attitude toward use of language; the attitude toward words; both as something "special," incorporating man's increasing articulateness, concern for language, and concern for the artistic.
The "'Ground" Rules"		
	form	recognizable and definable pattern; possessed by all speech events considered artistic;
	pleasure	goal of speech event; insight produced through it;
Figures		devices of language usage; properties of words.
	Dramatic	guiding the sympathies of the reader directly; the tragic mode;
	Indirection	engaging the reader indirectly through irony, duality, pranks, elegancy;
	Orational	exaggerated language; highflovn rhetoric; florid style; heightened delivery;
	Orchestrational	conventions of sound:rhythm & meter; repetition; natural sounds; use of words for "sound" content;
	Imagistic	conventions of meaning: imagery & conscious employment of syntax; words used to creat pictures; syntax to draw attention to words;
Figure-ing		relation between speakers & hearers reciprocal; both give assent & participate; exhibit aspects of control

Examples of Artistic Figures

1. Excerpt from Slow Dance on the Killing Ground by William Hanley (New York: Dramatists' Play Service, Inc., 1965), p. 28.

Randall: (Turns, crosses R. to counter, Puts down hat and umbrella, leans toward Glas.) True, all true. Truly. Actually it's the only thing in my life for which I have an explanation, the hole in my heart. (Turns L. Takes off glasses.) Randall, you see, was conceived of lust and the natural hungers of the flesh, but without love. It was the absence of love that left the hole in Randall's heart, no mistake. I mean (Turns back to Glas. Takes off cape, puts it on counter.) picture, if you will, Randall at the age of approximately six months when his momma discovered that his heart had not healed up all the way, like it was supposed to, like everyone else's, while he was still in his momma's womb. A comparatively rare occurrence, indeed. So they execute with great skill and care a delicate operation and sewed up that nasty hole in Randall's wee heart. A colloquial expression, that, a hole in the heart, but true. True. She used it often, his momma did. It got so that Randall began to think if he heard that expression one more time he be about ready to cut somebody's throat, it being a toss-up whether it would be his own or his momma's (Sits on stool D.R. starts to rock.) He was saved from the perpetration of that rash act, however, by the fact that about that time his momma was apprehended for offerin' her charms to a officer of the law. Funny thing he didn't arrest her until after he'd accepted her offer. Know what I mean? Reason I know is, I was in the closet at the time, watchin', unbeknownst to momma and her gentleman visitor who proved subsequently to be an officer of the law.

2. Excerpt from Lawd Today by Richard Wright (New York: Walker and Company, 1963), pp. 79-80.

Jake's mind fished about, trying to get hold of an idea to cover his feeling of uneasy emptiness. He noticed that Al was wearing a new shirt, a light green one with delicate white pencil stripes running vertically. Al's fat face rested in smug repose, and Jake wanted to disturb it, possess it, make some strength of that repose his own.

"So you got a new shirt, huh, Al?" asked Jake quietly, tentatively, sucking his teeth and throwing his leg over the arm of the chair.

Al modestly stoked the collar of his shirt with his fingers.

"Yeah, I picked it up yesterday."

"Where you steal it from?"

"Steal it? Nigger, you can't steal shirts like this!"

"You didn't buy it!"

"How come I didn't? Ain't I got money?" said Al. He was sitting upright, his round black face flushed with mock indignation.

"What did you ever buy?" asked Jake.

Al rose, rammed his hands deep into his pockets, and stood in front of Jake.

"You go into Marshall Field's and steal a shirt! It takes kale to wear clothes like this."

"Marshall Field's?"

"Yeah. Marshall Field's!"

"The closest you ever got to Marshall Field's was the shop window," said Jake.

"That's a Gawdawn lie!" said Al.

Slim and Bob listened silently, hoping for a bout of the dozens between the two.

"Whoever heard of a nigger going into Marshall Field's and buying a green shirt?" asked Jake as though to himself.

"Aw, nigger, quit signifying! Go buy you a shirt!"

3. Excerpt from Soul On Ice by Eldridge Cleaver (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), p. 26.

Sensing a creative moment in the offing, we all got very quiet, very still, and others passing joined the circle and did likewise.

"Baby," he said, "they walking in fours and kicking in doors; dropping reds and busting heads; drinking wine and committing crime; shooting and looting; high siding and low riding, setting fires and slashing tires; turning over cars and burning down bars; making Parker mad and making me glad....

4. Excerpt from Street Smart by Bob Adelman and Susan Hall (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972), pp. 5-9.

[*Kime and Peanuts]

*Your mother won a chess game for fifty cents and she said she was going out to get something to eat. She went to the bar.

Your mother's an autoworker.

*Your mother's a baby elephant.

Your mother plays for the Jets.

*Your mother plays for the Dallas Cowboys.

Your mother plays ping pong with King Kong.

*Your mother goes begging for surplus food.

Your mother wears sneakers to work.

*Your mother has a waffle face.

I went to your home and it was so hot even the roaches was singing, "Heat Wave."

*I went to your house and it was so cold the roaches was sitting by the radiator.

I went to your house and I found myself at the zoo.

*I went to your house and got hit by a low-flying bug.

I walk into your house and the roaches hold me up and say, "Password."

*I sat down on your couch and the roaches come up to me with a shotgun.

Your teeth are so yellow it puts the sun out of style.

*You glow in the dark.

I don't have no more snaps. You ran me down.

*I won. You ran dry.

Paznik/Handouts...7

1. Excerpt from student paper, reproduced without correction

My brother and I share much of the same political views, economic and principial interests. We could relate to each other very good and respect each other point of view although we may not necessarily agree with it. My cousin on the other hand is so adjustable that in general occasions and circumstances I tends to think she part of what she portrait such as when we are socializing. She gets into some kind of cultural thing of that group that you want to believe she is a part of that culture. She does it with so much ease and please that I admire her...

2. Excerpt from student paper, reproduced without correction

I would like to travel entirely to many different parts of this country, that make it was it is today. I would take my girl-friend and my mother. We would try and retrospect our lifes as black people.

3. Student paper, reproduced without correction

Title: Sleeping Volcano

Quiet, strong, tranquil. Mountain streams rushing down. I am the home of the eagle. I will protect you from the wind and show you the sea when it's calm.

You can lean on me. You can walk all over me. I'll carry you. I lead only myself, not others. I follow no one. All the time everything is all right. I mean, I take my troubles and fears in stride.

But then inexplicably without warning I explode! I burst into a thousand flames with rocks spurting and hurtling everywhich way maiming all in my path.

Quiet, strong, tranquil.